



6-15-2000

Fred Noonan Flying Services

W. P. Kinsella

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kinsella, W. P. (2000) "Fred Noonan Flying Services," *Westview*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol19/iss2/3>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Fred Noonan Flying Services

by W.P. Kinsella

"Courage is the price that life extracts for granting peace. The soul that knows it not knows no release from little things."

-Amelia Earhart

"Empty your pockets," Allison says.

"I'm not positive I want to do this," I say, as Allison gently turns me toward the plane, a single engine antique I'd guess was from the 1920's. While I rest my hands on the side, Allison like a police officer, parts my feet, pats me down as if I were under arrest.

She extracts a business card from my shirt pocket, my wallet from one rear pocket, my money clip, bills and change from the other. My keys and comb, a pen, Kleenex, my bank book from my side pockets.

"Today's the day," Allison says.

"We're really going to. . ." I stammer.

"Don't you want to make love with me?" Allison asks, knowing full well the answer.

It's been three days since we've had sex. Allison has had five a.m. calls each morning. Her business is setting up photo shoots. Sometimes she is also the photographer.

I'd do anything for Allison. It is as if she has me under a spell of some kind. Conjured, my catcher, a Cajun from Bayou Jeune Fille, Louisiana would say. Her voice, low and sultry is like mesmerizing music. She is my fantasy. Today, she wears a white sun dress with a few slashes of Aztec gold across the breasts and shoulders. Her Titian hair falls in waves to the middle of her back. Her cool blue eyes are the color of dawn.

"But, where's my uniform? We're doing a shoot, aren't we? Redbird Flying High. You said that was what it would be called."

I'm babbling. I can't believe this is happening. When she finishes emptying my pockets, Allison discards the contents onto the tarmac at our feet. I

think of my identification, credit cards, photos. All the years of my life casually tossed away, like ripping apart a stack of calendars.

"I told you whatever was necessary to get you here," she says, her voice a purr. She slips under my widespread arms, bobs up in front of me, between me and the plane, locks her arms around my neck, kisses me feverishly.

Though we've only known each other a short time, I am in love with Allison, thrillingly, magically in love, so much so that my senses seem more acute than I ever remember them. In restaurants I can gaze into Allison's eyes and hear conversations at other tables, smell the tantalizing food odors from nearby plates. Colors have a new intensity. In the on-deck circle I can pick her out in the stands twenty rows behind the Cardinals' dugout, tell at a glance what earrings she is wearing, read the smile on her lips as she watches me, her tongue peeking, massaging her bottom lip as it often does.

Allison works for the Cardinals' public relations firm. We met because early in the baseball year the star players have to pose for photographs that are eventually turned into posters and given out to fans on various special promotion days during the season. Four Cardinal regulars, being the 3, 4, 5, and 6 hitters in the lineup, the power of the order, were assigned to pose collectively. We met Allison at the ballpark at 9:00 a.m., an unheard of hour for a major league ballplayer to be up and alert, let alone dressed in an immaculate home uniform and ready to have makeup applied.

"I raised me a prize hog when I was in 4-H as a kid," said Foxy Rinehart our home run hitter, who grew up on a dirt farm near Nevada, Missouri, "and after I washed him, perfumed him, and tied a blue ribbon around his neck, he wasn't no purtier than we are this morning."

Foxy said this as Allison was powdering his



forehead and nose. She had already made him apply some lip gloss to his large, pouty sweet potato of a lower lip that was always cracked and sunburned, looking like it was beginning to swell after a recent punch in the mouth.

“Soon as you boys are presentable I’ll drive you out past Webster Groves to a big lumber yard; we’ll meet the photographer there.”

When she came to powder me, I was sitting on one of those blue metal folding chairs that are about as comfortable as ice. She nudged my knees apart and stepped in so close my nose was virtually between her breasts, her perfume was overpowering, expensive. I could feel heat radiating from her.

“Got to make you beautiful,” she said.

“I’ll reward you handsomely if you do,” I said. “I’m thirty-one years old and no one’s been able to come close so far.”

Allison was wearing a rose-colored blouse. She was close to my age, (thirty, I found out later) none of the other players on the shoot had turned twenty-five yet. I had once owned a spice-colored shirt the same magnificent shades of yellow and red as Allison’s hair.

“Maybe we’ll settle for rugged,” she said. “I’d need putty to fix you up properly, maybe even cement,” and she laughed a deep, throaty laugh that was genuine, not the sad little tinkle a lot of women pass off for laughter. Her breasts bobbed in front of my face. She was wearing what I decided to think of as safari pants, khaki with about a dozen pockets on the thighs and below the knees. “Your nose has more pores than a pumice stone, and three bandits could hide behind it the way it’s bent over.”

“I used to be beautiful,” I said, “until my face collided with a second baseman’s knee a couple of seasons back. Doc said my nose looked like a zucchini that had been stepped on.

I stared up into Allison’s eyes and was surprised to find a clear, almost iridescent blue, I expected hazel or green to match her hair.

We spent the whole day outdoors at a sawmill, amid the tangy odors of cedar and other cut lum-

ber, the spongy ground layered with sawdust, a lathe operator set up in the foreground, supposedly turning a spoke of white lumber into a bat, while the four of us posed around him in different combinations, looking strong and rugged, some in batting stances, some holding the bat like a rifle, or cradling it like a baby. A sign behind us read CUSTOM LUMBER. There was a photographer, a wisp of a man with the body of a child and a windblown fringe of white hair. Allison arranged the poses for him, even snapped a few of the pictures herself.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying so,” she said directly to me, “but you look as though you’re planning to kill worms instead of hit a baseball.”

Then she repositioned me and the bat, leaving her hand on mine just an instant too long as she moved the bat up my shoulder. Placing her hands flat on my shoulders she turned me a few degrees to the right; she left her hands there a long time, letting me feel the warmth filter through my uniform.

I scowled, trying to look at her as if she’d just poured a drink in my lap, but I couldn’t quite bring it off.

“I’ve seen a few games in my day,” she said. “When I was growing up, my dad and I had season tickets in K.C. Name the guy who let George Brett’s fly ball drop for a hit so George could beat Hal McRae for the batting title?”

“He played left field for the Twins, and his name started with a Z.”

“No points for a partial answer,” said Allison, adjusting the angle of the bat, smoothing my uniform.

She hadn’t flirted or acted even vaguely familiar with the other players. I wasn’t surprised at the attention she paid me, I’m used to that kind of thing, but I was a little worried, for I found myself attracted to her. What concerned me was that many women are captivated by athletes, by famous people in general, often not by the person at all, but by the power they represent.



“Scott,” Foxy Rinehart said to me one day, “The opportunities are endless. If a ballplayer on the road sleeps alone, he does so by choice.”

I agree.

Wariness was one of the reasons I didn’t make a move on Allison.

All athletes, but especially married men, even semi-married men like myself, have to be careful of the women who make obvious overtures. Some women collect ballplayers the way boys collect baseball cards. Then there are the lunatic few hoping for a chance to file a paternity suit.

As Allison and I talked over a lunch of sandwiches and soft drinks at the sawmill, the other players never seemed younger to me. They horsed around, like the boys most of them were, talking music and nightclubs, girls and cars. The day was one of my rare off days in St. Louis. After the other players were dropped off, Allison and I went for dinner, where I found myself opening up to her more than I had with anyone in years.

“Ballplayers shouldn’t marry,” I heard myself saying, “or if they do they shouldn’t have kids. Once a baby comes along, the wife doesn’t go on the road anymore, another child and she skips spring training. Then, when the oldest goes into kindergarten, the family stays home, wherever that may be, until school is out. That means they can’t come to the city where you’re playing until July, and if the city is like St. Louis where the summers are molten, the family stays home in the air conditioned mansion. Half the guys on the team are in my situation. The season is long and lonely and absence, as they say, does not make the heart grow fonder. The distances that are at first only miles become chasms of resentment on both sides. Everyone thinks they can handle the separations, almost none can.”

“I know all about separation,” said Allison. “I’ve got a guy, but he’s always made it clear his career comes first. He’s a foreign correspondent with CBS. Now you see him now you don’t. I’ll come home and find him there, he sleeps for 48

hours, we make love, and then he’s gone to Bosnia, Lebanon or some other trouble spot for six weeks.”

“I didn’t even know I felt the things I’ve just told you,” I said. “I feel a little foolish for laying all this on you.”

I could tell by the way she looked at me that all I had to do was make the first move. But I didn’t. I needed to be certain Allison wasn’t a collector, that she was someone who wanted me, not the uniform, the power, the celebrity, the money.

Whatever my wife and I had once had was gone. I’d known it for a couple of years, but didn’t want to admit it, even subconsciously. Though we were not legally separated, when I went home to Memphis at the end of last season we lived separately. I still saw a lot of Sandra and the kids. My phone call home, (I still call about three times a week) a call that at one time produced laughter and I love yous, and, from me, a pitch by pitch recount of the plays I’d been involved in that evening, and from Sandra a recounting of her day and the cute things the kids did and said, was, as usual, only a long litany of complaints from Sandra about the children, the weather, the house.

I listened, saying virtually nothing, wondering how things could have changed so much without either of us being conscious of it.

After I hung up I sighed, reminding myself that I only had two or three years left as a pro. “I’ll muddle through,” I thought. My best years are behind me, I’ve got to adjust to the inevitable slide, the hanging curve ball that only makes it to the warning track because my timing is off 1/1000 of a second, the step I’ve lost in the outfield, the lapses of concentration caused by my thinking of my deteriorating abilities. “Things will improve when I’m home for good,” I thought. But the thought of being *home for good* with a wife who has become a stranger, a family I barely know, left me depressed, my limbs lead weights, dragging me down.

Allison phoned about a week later.

“I’ve arranged for another promotion poster,”



she said. "One using you alone. Just got the idea last night. I pitched it to the Cardinals this morning and they love it. It will be called REDBIRD FLYING HIGH."

"What does it involve?" I asked. A public relations person once asked several members of the Cardinals, including me, to dress in costumes identical to the team mascot, Fred Bird the Redbird. Another suggested the whole team should be photographed mud wrestling to promote Fan Appreciation Night.

"Oh, nothing to worry about, it will all be done on the tarmac. We'll rent an old biplane, the kind



Photo by Joel Kendall

they used to use for stunt flying, we'll stand you out on the wing with your bat. We may put a helmet and goggles on you, I haven't decided. We'll get a big fan and the wind will be blowing the pilot's scarf and my hair. I'm going to sit behind the pilot. After the shoot we'll paint in a background of sky and cloud and ground below. It will look exactly like we're flying at a thousand feet."

I agreed to do the project. We talked on, arranging to meet for dinner after that night's game. That evening I did make the first move.

"For the rest of the night we're going to be the only two people in the world," I said. "No one else exists, family, business, baseball, whatever—all erased. Just us, we can say anything, we can. . . ."

"I know," said Allison. "It's all right to be in love, just for tonight," and she placed her fingers on the back of my neck, and found her way into my arms. I lifted her hair with my left hand, kissed along her neck, nibbled her earlobe.

After long, sweet hours of lovemaking, of enjoying the terrible thrill of being close to someone after being alone for such a long time, we talked dreamily of what it would be like if we never had to open the door and go back into the real world. But the real world intruded on us soon enough, for even though I didn't want to, I began listing the many dissatisfactions of my life.

"I'm tired of baseball," I said. "It used to be my whole life, but I'm past my prime. I play for the money. I know I'm never going to hit three home runs in a game again, never going to bat in a hundred runs or hit thirty homers. I'm batting .280 but the fans boo me because I'm not the hot shot kid I was seven seasons ago."

Allison leaned over me, her hair trailing across my face, we kissed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was the one who was going to be sure we didn't talk this way. I've already whined about my bad marriage and my career. Sometimes I just wish I could disappear."

"What if I told you you could," said Allison, her



lips against my cheek, her musical voice a thrill.

"I'm too well known to disappear," I said matter of factly. "No matter where I'd go, some eight year old would appear out of the woodwork to ask for an autograph."

"Unless you really disappeared."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose there was a unique place," said Allison, a very special somewhere where all the people who vanish without a trace from the face of the earth—a place where they all go to live."

"You're not serious?"

"I believed you had an imagination," said Allison. There was a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"What the heck do you mean?" I drew away from her. I sat up, swung my feet over the side of the bed, sat with my back to her.

"Take it easy," Allison said, reaching out, tentatively touching my shoulder. "There's more going on here than you're aware of."

I recall that and other conversations as I hold the telephone receiver in my hand and dial part of the number. All but the final digit in fact—I wait and wait, then hang up. I feel like a high school kid dialing for a date, tongue clotted, brain paralyzed with fear. I can almost hear my Cardinal teammates razzing me. I can see the freckled face and fishlike mouth of Foxy Rinehart, who fancies himself a comedian, saying, "Come on, Scotty, how scared can you get dialing long distance information?" Foxy has no idea what's at stake. Baseball and partying are his only interests. He doesn't have an imagination. He has to be constantly entertained: women, drinks, movies, TV, dancing, video games. Allison is right. I have an imagination, something that can be both a curse and a blessing, as I am finding out.

What I've decided to do is, for the first time in my life, believe in something magical. Allison has brought me the magic, or at least gifted me with the key to unlock magic.

I take a deep breath, imagine myself stepping into the batter's box against Greg Maddox or Steve Avery. I think of the way I let the tension flow out of my body, concentrating so fiercely I can hear my blood circulating as I challenge the pitcher. I'm as good as you are, I think. I've hit you before and I'll hit you again. Burn it in here, across the plate within reach of my bat.

The number I'm calling is information for a town not far from St. Louis. I dial, all the while stifling an urge to hang up at the first ring.

If Allison could see me, I think, as I often do when batting on the road, at that instant when the pitcher releases the ball, that instant when I know the pitch, from my point of view is perfect, know it will travel toward me in slow motion, almost freezing as it approaches the plate where I will make full contact driving it high and deep toward and beyond the outfield fence. I want Allison to feel the joy an instant like that brings me; I want her to share the rush that completing this seemingly innocuous phone call gives me.

"Information for what city, please?"

"Mexico, Missouri," I reply, my voice shaky.

"Go ahead."

"A number for Fred Noonan Flying Services?"

There is a long pause.

"Is that N-o-o-n-a-n?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that is a silent listing."

"But, it's a business."

"I know that's unusual, but I've double checked. I'm sorry."

Relief and disappointment mix within me as I hang up. Perhaps Allison, and everything that's happened to me in the past few weeks, is part of an elaborate hoax.

But who would do such a thing? If it were a scheme, it is far too elaborate to be hatched by any of my teammates, their idea of a joke is to nail someone's cleats to the floor or put Jello in a jockstrap.

I recall more of our first night together. Me



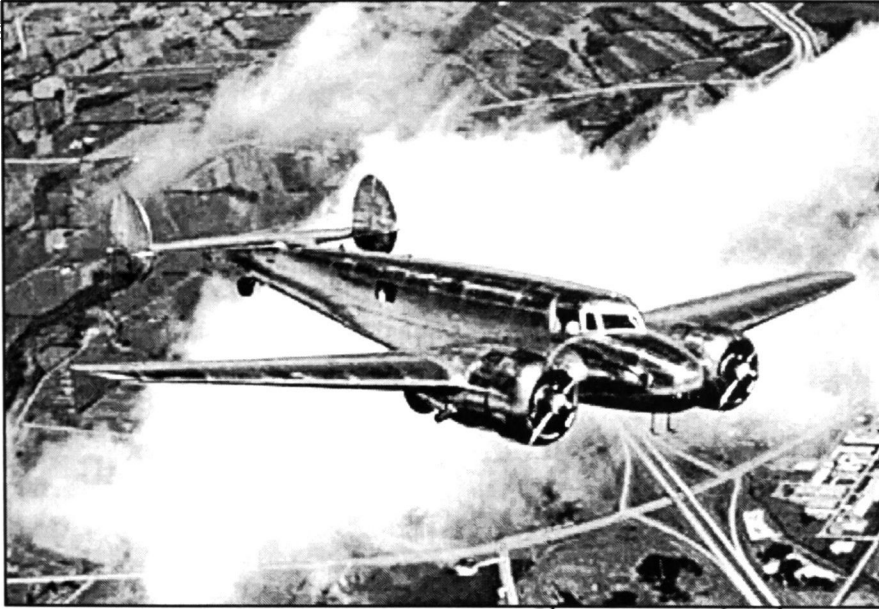


Photo courtesy of airplanes.com

quizzing Allison.

“Who lives in this place?”

“The truly lost. Those who need a second chance.”

“Like the faces on the milk cartons? All those lost children?”

“Some of them, the ones who truly disappeared, the ones who weren’t kidnapped by a parent or murdered. The ones who *really* ran away.”

“I suppose everyone there is a descendant of Ambrose Bierce.”

“Some of them might be. There are thousands of people there now.”

“That’s an odd idea. How did you come up with it?”

“I’m special,” said Allison. “Didn’t you sense I was special?”

“Where is this place and how do we get there?”

“I know a way to get there, there’s a company called Fred Noonan Flying Services.”

“What makes you believe this place exists?”

“Someone I know went there. Told me how to get the number of Fred Noonan Flying Services.”

“Went there?”

“Took nothing with him. Caught a taxi to the airport at 1:00 a.m., gave his wristwatch to a man

who was sweeping the floor, and vanished.”

“Did you call the number he gave you?”

“I thought about it for a few weeks, and one night when things were going badly, both personally and professionally, I did. But information said the listing for Fred Noonan Flying Services was silent. Isn’t that strange?”

“Who is Fred Noonan?”

“Do you know the story of Amelia Earhart?”

“Of course. He was Amelia Earhart’s navigator. I saw a

movie about them. Susan Clark played Amelia Earhart.”

“Did you know they flew into yesterday? I went and looked it all up. They flew off from New Guinea on July 3, 1937, for a 3,000-mile flight to Howland Island. But Howland was a day earlier; it was a flight into yesterday. And they were never heard from again.”

“And you think they ran away?”

“There were rumors that Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan were in love, that they found an isolated Pacific island and lived out their lives there. She was a very independent lady. He was tall and handsome, looked a little like Clark Gable, and Amelia was pretty, blond and boyish with a sensual mouth. Historians tend to think they blundered onto the Japanese doing something sneaky on a small atoll, and the Japanese executed them.”

“You don’t think so?”

“We’re all around you, Scotty. Waiting. Anything is possible. There is a place, a town, a small city really, good climate, relatively isolated. A place where strangers are discouraged from settling, unless of course, they’re running away from their past. A place where the police chief files *all* missing person reports in the waste basket.”



"You have a bizarre sense of humor."

"I know."

We were silent for several minutes.

"So, Jimmy Hoffa? Was there a young woman like yourself who was turned on by dangerous men?"

"If he's with us, and I could tell you but I won't, it may be because we needed a union organizer."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"Suppose I want to go. How do I get there?"

"Fred Noonan Flying Services only flies to one destination," said Allison. "People just know. Like birds migrating."

Our eyes met, Allison's smile quizzical, challenging, full of irony. Her pink tongue peeked between scarlet lips.

"I meet some pretty odd people in my line of work," she said.

"Like ballplayers?"

"Sometimes. But there's more. I could name the town where Fred Noonan Flying Services is located. There's a song about Amelia, written and recorded literally hours after she and Fred vanished. Back in the thirties that was how disasters and major public events were dealt with." Allison began to sing, "Happy landings to you Amelia Earhart, farewell first lady of the air."

Until that moment nothing truly extraordinary had ever happened to me. I'd been a successful athlete, I'd led the National League in home runs and RBI's, but I'd never experienced anything other-worldly. As Allison sang, I had a vision, and I understood that she did indeed know some unusual people. I saw myself and Allison flying in a very old plane, there was a pilot in leather helmet and goggles. The pilot's scarf snapped in the wind just in front of our faces, Allison's hair flowed behind her, the wind strafed my face making my eyes water. The vision was gone in a tenth of a second.

"Name that town," I said.



Photo courtesy Fred Burnam

Allison scratched around in the bedside table, she wrote the name of a town on the back of her business card.

“When you reach the operator, you ask for Fred Noonan Flying Services. The rest is up to you.”

“I’d want you with me.”

“That’s the kind of beautiful lie we agreed to tell each other tonight, but just for tonight.” Allison said, cuddling down into the bed, resting her head on my chest.

“It’s not a lie,” I said. “I mean it.” Then a thought struck me. “This doesn’t have anything to do with the new poster—REDBIRD FLYING HIGH?”

“Well, it does and it doesn’t. You have no idea how hard I had to think to come up with the idea. I had to see you again, and I didn’t have the nerve just to call and say, ‘Hey, I know how you, how we can disappear forever.’”

“You wanted to tell me that, even before tonight?”

“I knew everything you told me tonight, just by looking at you. I have enough experience to recognize lonely when I see it.”

“So, the poster was just an excuse.”

“To get us together tonight, yes. The Fred Noonan story has nothing to do with the poster, but everything to do with what we agreed about this evening. We can say anything, do anything. Maybe Fred Noonan Flying Services is my fantasy. Scotty, I can’t imagine anything as wonderful as starting all over—a completely fresh start, with you.”

“Would there be baseball?” I laughed as soon as I said it. “Baseball must have a greater hold on me than I imagined.”

“There would be baseball. But the kind you could enjoy; you could be a star, a big fish in a small pond, or you could coach, or just be a spectator. I can’t imagine a small, quiet American city without baseball.”

“Could you be happy with someone who wasn’t famous? A quiet country boy from Memphis who happens to know a little about holding a bat?”

“Why did you put me off last week?” asked Allison. “We could have been together then, without my having to invent the poster.”

“I know I must have puzzled you. It has nothing to do with morality. It’s just that I never met a woman I thought I’d want to be alone with after we made love. With you it was different. You have no idea how much I wanted to take your hand and say, ‘Would I be way out of line if I kissed you?’ Of course, I knew the answer without asking the question. I may have appeared oblivious to all the signals and body language, but I wasn’t. With you, Allison, I knew that if we made love, I’d never want to leave you, and I wasn’t ready to carry that weight just then.”

“I understand,” said Allison, cuddling closer.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“What’s truth?”

Before I leaned over to turn out the light, I studied the name of the town Allison had given me, committed it to memory, in case in the morning the back of the card was blank.

The next morning I made my first attempt to contact Fred Noonan Flying Services.

Allison and I spent the next four nights together. Then the Cardinal home stand ended. We left for an eight day road trip. I had plenty of time to mull things over. Even if it was all a beautiful dream, I didn’t mind. Suppose I dialed again and the operator told me the number was still silent, I thought. There would always be a lingering hope that the next time I tried I would be put through. Hope, I decided, is all anyone needs. Lack of hope, I decided, was what was wrong with my life.

“I’ll be back in St. Louis late Sunday,” I said to Allison. “If I get through before then, and I’ve got a feeling I’m going to—like a day when I look in the mirror and can tell by my reflection that I’m going to get three hits—maybe we can take a little plane ride Monday morning?”

On the third day of the road trip, in Atlanta, I dialed information again, and as I did, the same



excitement filled me as when I dialed Allison's number, as when I waited to hear her throaty voice, the laugh clear as singing crystal. As the number rang, I breathed deeply, imagined myself in the on-deck circle, a game-deciding at-bat about to occur.

"What do you suppose it will be like . . . this town, this city, this final destination? Can you give me a clue as to where it's located?"

"It may be only a few feet away," said Allison enigmatically. "Though it may take a half day to get there. It will be peaceful, no more pressure for you to perform on the field or off, for either of us. Tree-lined streets, people working at things they love to do. Everyone will love their job. Merchants will treat their customers like human beings, and customers will act in a civilized manner. There'll be no bureaucrats, only reasonable rules that everyone obeys, no alcoholics, petty criminals, no zealots of any kind."

"Did you pick me? I mean personally? I'm beginning to think chance wasn't involved."

"What do you think?"

"Are you real? Where did you come from? Did you just appear out of nowhere in full bloom?"

"I'm as real as you are."

"Which doesn't answer my question. What about . . . over there?"

"I'm more at home over there. There are other dimensions chattering all about us, one or two, perhaps many. It's like when the Northern Lights envelop you, the static, the eeriness, the half-heard conversations. Have you never heard a whimper when you knew you were alone? Voices in the foliage? The phantom hand that brushes a cheek? The spooky feeling of being watched? Occasionally, one of us is able to invade dreams." Allison stared into my eyes.

"I tried. Very hard. I wanted you to dream of me. I wanted you to feel, when you first met me, like we were old friends."

"Have you done this before?"

"We're watching all the time. We always need

new blood. I volunteered to find some."

"I don't care for that idea. What am I a stud service?"

"Oh, don't be so sensitive. Of course you fill a need. Everyone does. The void you fill is my need for a life partner. I decided on you after I made certain you fit all the criteria. If we hadn't hit it off, I would have looked elsewhere. But I fell in love with you."

"Was I your first choice?"

"Of course."

"And would you tell me if I wasn't?"

"No."

"And if we hadn't hit it off?"

"Well, there's a very nice playwright in New York. A Bismarck, N.D. boy, whose first play was a massive hit, and who hasn't been able to write anything else since. He's sad, frustrated, not enjoying life."

"What will happen to him now? Will someone else save him?"

"Perhaps. That's not for you to worry about."

There is a metallic clang, like a soft door chime, as a recorded voice spells out the number for Fred Noonan Flying Services. The blood roars in my ears like the ocean as I quickly copy it down, wait for the recorded voice to repeat it so I can be certain I have it right.

I quickly dial the number.

"Fred Noonan Flying Services," says a gravelly voice.

"I'd like to book a flight," I say.

"Right. To where?"

"A special place. I'm told it's the only place you go."

"That's right. We have only one destination."

"Can you tell me where that is?"

"Sorry. It's kind of a mystery tour."

"Right."

"How many and from what city?"

"Two," I say. "St. Louis. Monday morning, if that's convenient."



"It's convenient."

"Do you mind if I ask a question?"

"Shoot?"

"Why the name?"

"Of the company, you mean? Fred Noonan? No secret. We're dealers in old aircraft, nothing newer than thirty-five years old. We supply planes and pilots to movie companies, TV shows, air shows. And we run these mystery tours, people like to fly back into the past. The early days of aviation hold a lot of mystery. You know we've got a Lockheed Electra, big silver jobby, just like the one Amelia and Fred were flying when we... when they disappeared.

"Fred Noonan was a lot more than Amelia's navigator. He was one of the pioneers of American aviation. Twenty-two years of flying over oceans; he helped establish Pan American Airways; he was one of the first instructors and aerial navigators. Yet he's almost completely forgotten, ask anybody and they'll tell you Amelia Earhart was alone when she disappeared."

He sounded as I imagined Ernest Hemingway would have, rugged, ruddy, a scuffed bomber jacket, a battered pilot's cap.

"You can't take anything with you. The clothes you're wearing. Pockets empty."

"I understand."

"Good. We get people trying to sneak strange things along. Bags of money, jewelry, pets. There was this banker had ten \$5,000 dollar bills in each shoe. One lady had a canary bird hid in her hairdo."

After the conversation with Fred Noonan ended, I sat quietly for a long time. I felt the way I had almost ten years before, when I was first called up to the Cardinals from Louisville: full of anticipation, positively twitching with excitement.

I can see the plane, taxiing down the runway, Fred Noonan at the controls, crouching behind his windscreen. Allison and I behind him. Ascending. One Redbird flying high... flying toward yesterday.

But it isn't that simple. In fact it's ridiculous.

The next time I see Allison I try to make light of the whole situation.

"This is all some kind of elaborate joke, right?"

"Do you love me?"

"That's answering a question with a question. But, yes."

"Have you ever heard of limerance?"

"No."

"It's a term to do with going out on top. Quitting while you're ahead, leaving the party before the gin runs out. At its most extreme it involves suicide. A couple like us, in the wild throes of first romance. We know things will never be so perfect. All life's problems are going to wear us down. Your career will end. Maybe we'll have children. Our priorities will change."

"If we died now..."

"I don't want to hear any more. Hell, anyone can have a business card made up that says Fred Noonan Flying Services, get a telephone listing..."

"I don't mean die, die. You know that." Allison covered my mouth with hers, her tongue electric, her taste nectar.

"Is it far?" I shout.

"A fair distance, not all in miles," Allison replies.

"Do we have enough fuel?"

"Relax. Lindy flew the Atlantic in a plane this size. Besides, Fred Noonan would never let us run out of fuel."

"Is there really a place where we can start over?"

"Of course."

"Sing to me, Allison."

Her voice is so thrilling, somewhere between sex and sunshine. "Happy landings to you..."

The wind, as we whip down the runway, blows Allison's long hair and white scarf back toward me.

"Farewell... first lady of the air..."

The fringe snaps against my cheek, stinging like a willow switch.

